

The Strange Duelers

Bertie M. Layne

It was the eve of All Saints and the Story Tellers Club had met as usual in the spacious salon of Marin. We had eaten our corn patties in the true tradition of the day and were sipping our rum and falernum, conversing the while upon light matters affecting our city's affairs. The old man had not yet descended and every now and again someone would look up and ask, "Where is Marin? What can be keeping him so long?"

But soon there was a movement behind the velvet drapery at the far end of the room. It parted and the old man appeared to the welcome voices of his guests. This was just like Marin: he had a flair for making an entrance at just the auspicious moment when all the batteries of attention could be turned upon him.

But who was that behind him, trailing and mingling his shadow with our host's? Marin could be depended upon to do the strangest things at the right time. Last Easter he had brought in a Nun from the Convent of St. Mary's. At Carnival it was a gypsy from Brazil. The Nun turned out to be a Doctor of Education, and a researcher in the revelations of modern would-be saints. The gypsy was a renegade from Romany who had run off and made a fortune trading in the Caribbean.

And now this pudgy fellow with unkempt hair and solemn, bright, black eyes set in a wrinkled dark-brown face. Who was he?

"Where does Marin unearth these creatures?" the Magistrate Langevine asked me in a whisper, taking his glass for a moment from his lips and with a squint eyeing the stranger.

"You say unearth, Langevine? I ask where does he birth them? In some way they all seem to be his children."

But to tell the truth, Marin was to all appearances an aristocrat. Not of the Spanish or English breed, but French both by parentage and temper. And only a Frenchman could be trusted to perform the macabre with such apparent detachment as he performed it. One got the uncomfortable impression too, sometimes, that Marin brought in these people to laugh at us and mock us in some uncanny fashion, for they all revealed themselves slowly and distinctly to be characters with some strange, sweet power that could not be fathomed upon an initial contact, and were all in a sense like Marin, expressing some facet of his personality.

Of course Marin was the greatest mocker among them. He laughed at our customs, our positions and our wealth. But

one couldn't be angry with him for he mocked himself too when he bantered us.

"Look," he said to us once with an all inclusive sweep of his arm that took in not only his glittering salon but the whole city, "this is all a zoo, and we are the rare animals, caged in and on view."

"And, who, pray tell us," quipped Langevine, "are our keepers and trainers?"

"Ah, the pound sterling, customs and good opinions, these are our keepers and trainers! Money circumscribes us like a wall, and customs and good opinions train us for the acts we must put on. They whip us into shape. We have come to like our zoo though, because most of us have well nigh forgotten the forest, but one of these days this zoo will catch fire and burn down and the guards and trainers will be powerless to prevent those who would scamper back to the safety of the forest. Only those very rare creatures who have been fed and pampered will die of neglect, for they have been spoon-fed too long to be able to forage for themselves."

"These very rare creatures, who would you say they are, that know not how to forage for themselves?" I asked.

"I for one, have always worked for my living."

"Yes, you and I rush off to the feeding trough when the feeders toss in our meat and all the work that we have to do is to go and get it, but we work in going after it. But there are those who are held up in the arms and fed. Yes, those very rare creatures. You can see them paraded through the streets on special occasions, borne in the carriages of customs and sheltered by the guards of good opinion. They are the kings and queens, their children and their cousins, the governor and nobility, spoon-fed and with a gold spoon at that! They are the ones that shall die of grief and neglect when this great zoo shall be burnt down."

I thought of all this as I looked at Marin making the rounds of the distinguished members of our club. Lawyers, doctors, legislators and school-men, prelates, planters and business men. He pulled out from behind him at almost every introduction the little old fellow whom he presented as one Mr. Chazad, a Carib, and master of the village school at Nakima. He would talk to us, Marin said, and tell us one of the legends of the Caribs if he felt so inclined.

It was a fact that these Caribs often proved unwilling to part with any of that treasury of legends preserved within the archives of their minds and which gathered through the years an aureole to themselves even as precious heirlooms do.

After the initial rounds had all been made we settled back while Marin spoke.

"Once in a while out of the forest of humanity," he started, "comes a rare creature to this zoo of ours to tell us the news and remind us of ourselves. It is refreshing that their existence is generally unknown, for if it was they would have been captured long ago and encaged like ourselves, but it is because they have not shown themselves to the greedy eyes of the safari that they still have their freedom.

"Such a one is our special guest for the evening. Mr. Chazad is a graduate of the University of Maracaibo, a student of language and Caribbean folk lore. Presently he is taken up with a course in anthropology. He is an old friend of mine, and I have asked him to come this All Saints Eve to tell us something of the past in any manner to suit his fancy."

There was a discernable feeling akin to discomfort at these remarks, but it was nothing in comparison to what followed. The Carib, as he stepped to the dias set for him, revealed at once an art that was being rapidly lost among men of society, for combined with all that Marin had said, he was of a poetic nature.

We leaned forward to watch and listen to him, and thus did he begin his tale:

Draw near all you who love of olden times to hear,
And listen to the tale I tell:

'L' honneur, la verite' et la belle'.

It is a tale of days when pirates roved about the blue Caribbean,

And fought and hid their gold,

Yet not a tale of buccaneers and doubloons.

It is a tale of days when the mad heel of Spain

Across the mountains and the pampas marched,

Yet not a tale of Cortez or his ilk.

It is a tale of love,

The love of man for maid.

And maybe you will have desire to hear

For all the world so loves a lover and his love

The tale's become immortal.

And so, draw near and I the tale will tell.

'L'honneur, la verite', et la belle.'

"It was in the days when Trinidad was young and the English had not yet come to disturb our green island. The Spaniards had ceased to be brutal and Frenchmen still loved the soil. In those days the humming bird had yet a cadence in the beating of his wings. The flying fish made Pana's Gulf their only home and knew nothing of Barbados. There were no sour oranges, or mangoes full of sting; the avocado's meat was thick and mellow and sweet and not watery like today's. The deer in the forest were fat and docile, for men

chased them only for fun, taking the old for flesh and finding it still tender.

"Near the bend of the Sangre Grande River where it widens beneath Arima, the stronghold of the Carib Queen, there lived an old man and his wife and their little grandson Pierre. They went by the surname of De Verteuil. Since they were old and had attended always to their own affairs, the Caribs never molested them, but they were only forbidden like all strangers, to enter the fortress of Arima. When Pierre was twelve years old, a travelling Catholic priest, who was somewhat of a mystic, taught him along with the Catechism three rules to guide his life. Said he: "Learn and love honor, Pierre, and you never will fear anything either in the darkness or the light. Speak and think the truth, my son, and you will sleep always undisturbed whenever you would rest. Love beauty, also. The beauty of the fields and the forests, the beauty in the gracefulness of the deer and other forest creatures. The beauty in the rain and the wind as it whistles through the forest. Ah, Pierre, there is beauty in everything and if you find it and hold it fast, you will be forever happy, and will never really die, for when men think that you are gone, you will be but mingled with the eternal spirit of the beautiful—ah, but that is if your life is beautiful."

"Wide and solemn-eyed the boy listened to the priest, whom he never did see after that. As he grew older, he learned to chase but not to hunt the deer, and gained in doing so a swiftness of foot akin to that of the Carib youth. He learned also never to molest the weak; thus he did not join in the ambushes on travelling Indians to rob the old women of their gold or dishonor the Carib maids. And it came about that one day while he chased a buck along Sangre Grande's edge he came suddenly upon an open glade where the sun streamed down, and there in the river was an Indian girl singing as she bathed. She was beautiful as Carib young women usually are in their full maidenhood. Quiet, deep black eyes she had, and full, round heaving breasts. Pierre stood still, but she had heard the commotion and turned. Seeing him, she shrieked and trembled as he looked on her in wonder. He did not advance, but turned his back as she gained courage to leave the water and robe herself. From a safe distance she spoke to him.

"Who are you, stranger, and what are you doing on our grounds?"

"I am Pierre, a hunter, but I did not know that this was Indian grounds so far below Arima. And who are you?"

"I am Naparaima, the great-niece of the Queen."

They stood for a moment watching each other and neither spoke a word. In that brief space something passed between

them; they had found a bond that tied their souls forever. They parted promising to meet again at that same destined spot. And so sometimes in the daytime when the sun was hot they would meet in the cool arbor under the lemon trees. Sometimes at night when the world had retired they would seek the safety of bushy Maraval that overlooks the lagoon, where they could see but remain unseen. There they spoke often their tenderest desires and promised faithfulness forever. But while this was good enough it could not last for long. No Carib maid could join her life with a stranger's and remain alive. If these trysts were even known, it would mean torture to both of them and maybe death.

"One clear night when there was no moon, they sat in their accustomed place. The black eyes of Naparaima were full of light and wide. Her raven hair hung around her shoulders and covered her like a shawl, but she was strangely still. From far away the wind brought up the night calls of the creatures of the forest and lagoon, and sometimes it brushed their cheeks with its warm breath. Suddenly Naparaima stood bolt upright and terror charged her eyes.

'Pierre, Pierre, we must be gone, and quick!'

'Do not be afraid my little shy, wood dove, I can protect you here.'

'Oh, no! Did you not know what night of the year this is?'

'Yes! This is All Saints Eve. But do you keep our customs, too?'

'I do not know of All Saints Eve, but tonight the spirits of our dead roam abroad and any stranger found within our grounds will be killed before daylight. So come, Pierre, you must flee!'

'Pierre was silent but undisturbed and allowed her to lead him away to the outskirts of the place. Then she kissed him and putting on his neck her charm she turned and ran. He had gone but a few paces when it seemed that the very air was changed. A chilly wind slithered across from the lagoon and black clouds with sulphurous fringes came up and filled the sky. He quickened his pace. Suddenly out of the murky darkness came the roar of a hollow voice. 'Stranger, stand and say your name!'

Pierre trembled slightly and looked to answer. A sudden flash of lightning revealed the steely glint of what appeared to be the polished blade of a cutlass four feet or thereabouts in length. It was raised and threatening. But then out of the brush behind him he felt a presence come, but dared not turn to see for fear of what was there before him, though he felt greatly reassured somehow by its standing back of him.

"While he thought of this, the outline of two other dark and threatening forms took shape before him, armed alike as the first. But instantly he could sense behind him the increase of two more supporting presences. To him they all had only form, but no solid substance, rather like the energy of electricity. He knew that they were there but could not touch or even see them.

"Then suddenly like the upsweep of a terrible wind rising from the earth, these unearthly opposing forces joined in a combat with Pierre in the very center. It was like the howling of the nightwind in the time of a hurricane, and thunderclaps broke overhead, as if the day of judgment had come and the dead must be raised. Forked lightning flamed down from the four corners of the sky and converged upon that single center where these unearthly forces strove for mastery (of a human soul). Then there were three sounds like shrieks one after another and a mad rush as of someone in escape. Then a quiet settled, while the common forces of nature resumed command of their region. Pierre stood half-dazed, awhile. And then a voice, riding as it were on the wind, called to him.

'Pierre, Pierre, I am Honor, I fought for you and won.'
It kept calling as it rode onward, until it died away with the wind over the lagoon. When that had passed another came flowing swiftly, and passed him calling,

'Pierre, Pierre, I am Truth, I fought for you and won.'
It kept on as did the other until it faded away with the wind racing out to the sea. And yet again out of a stronger wind that seemed to gallop skyward like a steed, another voice more soothing than the others to his disturbed senses called: 'Pierre, my little son, I am Beauty, I fought for you and we have won.'

As it left the earth, triumphant echoes trailed behind it.
'I fought for you and we have won.'

"And then dawn came with the sunlight flowing through the valley of El Teconche. Pierre, as he regained complete control of himself under the radiant light, found himself surrounded by an excited mass of Caribs chattering unintelligibly and pointing to him in admiration.

"A young Carib stepped from the crowd and addressed him. 'Welcome, Pierre, welcome to our tribe. You are now one of us. Ask for your birth-right and it shall be yours.'
'Why, what have I done, what is this all about?' he asked.
'Ah, you did not know? Any man brave enough to spend this night in the Carib burying ground and be found alive next day has by this act been born into our tribe. You have, therefore, a birth-gift. What then will it be?'

"He looked up in amazement and saw in the front ranks

of the crowd his beloved Naparaima, and holding out his hands to her, he whispered dreamily, 'Give me the maiden Naparaima to be my wife.'"

§ § § §

Sea Wall

Pausing beside the low sea wall,
Caught by the night,
I heard huge waves upon the beach
Spending their might.

The salty breeze that touched my face
Made the palms sway
And clouds hurry to mask the stars,
As in the bay

Red and yellow lights led ships.
I seemed so small—
My cheeks were fire—my fists clenched
I struck the wall.

The night was not for me to praise;
Its grace to charm
Created power that weak words
Had power to harm.

—Ina Marshall

§ § § §

Two Lives Merge

A long full train and fragile veil,
A white carnation on blue serge,
Two golden bands, some whispered vows:
Two lives merge.

The morning news, burnt toast with tea,
Two rooms created without art,
A bowling ball and love on film:
Two lives part.

—Ina Marshall